

[Register](#)[Sign In](#)

Thousands of kites once filled the skies above India's cities. Today the tradition is dying out

19 hours ago

Share Save

Mir Umar



Vijay Pandey

(Credit: Vijay Pandey)

Kite flying was once a cherished tradition in many parts of India, with people crowding the rooftops during kite festivals. But recent heatwaves and a number of deaths due to illegal kite strings have seen many abandoning the once popular pastime.

The way his kites would catch the wind. It was legendary. Once, Syed Moinuddin – popularly known as Bhai Mian – flew 1,187 kites on a single string, stunning the crowd at a festival, about 30 years ago. For years, Bhai Mian, a so-called "godfather of kite-flying", perfected and promoted his sport across India. He flew kites of many different shapes. Soaring, darting, seemingly alive. Each one a small frame of intense colour, raging against an impassive sky. A tiger tamed by a thread.

I watch as his son, Syed Jamaluddin flips through an old file of certificates, photographs and newspaper clippings. He recalls how his father loved to fly kites from the terrace of their home. "I used to be with him, holding the spool," Jamaluddin says. Eventually, Jamaluddin flew his own kites – and delighted his father by making one in the shape of an aeroplane.

But kite-flying in India is a dying art, argues Jamaluddin. Patangbaazi, as it's called locally, is a tradition that dates back centuries. It has survived wars, colonialism, partition and pandemics. But the unstoppable rise of digital technology, climate change – and, shockingly reports of injuries and even

Increasingly, reports of injuries and even deaths caused by kite strings, appear to be slackening people's enthusiasm for kites. Those who still take to the roof tops and open spaces to send their kites into the sky now fear that the tradition may soon disappear forever – and take a vital part of Indian history with it.



Sayed Jamaluddin tries to make time to teach his son Afnan to fly kites in the hope of keeping the sport his father loved alive (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

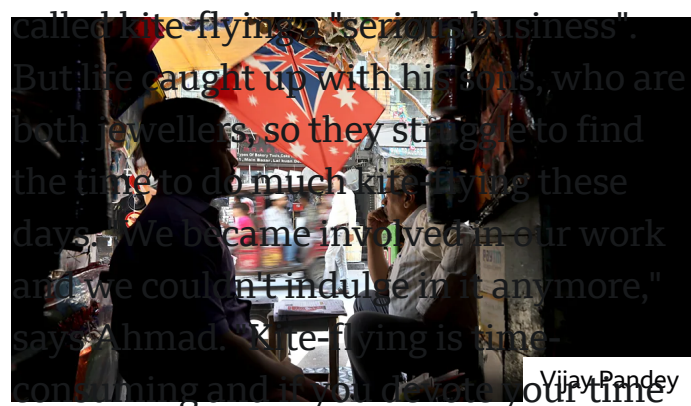
No-one knows where kite-flying came from. Some say it emerged in China and that Buddhist missionaries, travelling the Silk Road trade routes brought it to Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. "The journey of the kite has been like an exploration," says Nikita Desai, author of the book *A Different Freedom: Kite Flying in Western India*.

Desai writes about how kites were mentioned in the earliest writings of Namdev, a 12th Century Marathi poet-saint from India. Various popular Hindi songs also reference kite-flying. Today, some communities in India fly kites to celebrate the country's independence. And during Uttarayan, or Makar Sankranti, a Hindu festival at the end of winter, kite-flying marks the beginning of good times. The past-time has also evolved into a form of sport.

Kite fighting involves players who must manoeuvre their kite in such a way to bring an opponents' kite by cutting its string. Tournaments are mostly organised in open fields and crowds often gather to watch players fly against one another. Specially toughened strings are used, sometimes coated in crushed glass or other abrasive materials. In its rawest form, it's a test of attention and patience.

"It depends on the kite fighter's mind, just like in boxing – you anticipate the opponent's attack, here you do the same, with quick reflexes as your opponent inherits a love of kite-flying from their famous father. They travelled to various countries, competing and promoting the sport – just as he had done in India. Both Jamaluddin and his elder brother Ahmad, Jamaluddin's elder brother. It is also important to have body balance and a perfect angle to hold your string

steadily. The quality of the kite also matters." Bhai Mian, who founded the Delhi Kite Flying Association in 1985, always

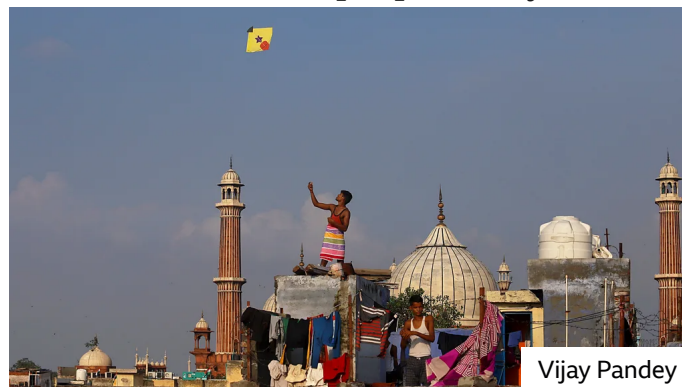


called kite-flying a "serious business". But life caught up with his sons, who are both jewellers, so they struggle to find the time to do much kite-flying these days. "We became involved in our work and we couldn't indulge in it anymore," says Ahmad. "Kite-flying is time-consuming and if you devote your time to it, there is going to be financial difficulty when you have a family to feed."

Many people find it hard to invest their time and money in kites. The kite-sellers of Lal Kuan, a wholesale market in Old Delhi, know this all too well. There used to be more than 20 kite shops here. Now, just five remain

just five remain.

"It was good in the beginning. There was a good sale of kites back in those days," says Mohammad Khalid, a kite seller in the market. His shop, opened by his



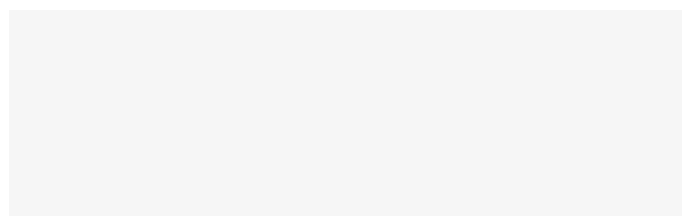
Vijay Pandey

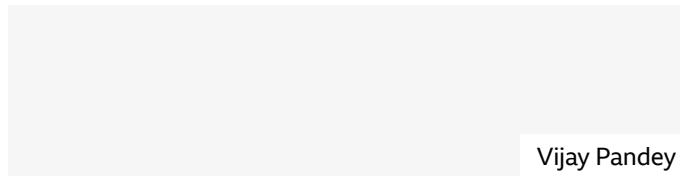
thing now.

The sight of kites flying from the rooftops during festivals is a traditional sight in Delhi, but the numbers have dwindled over the years. (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

Mobile internet, and TV are to blame, he adds. But so too are rising temperatures in India, a symptom of climate change. Heatwaves increasingly force people to shelter indoors, says business. "If things remain the same, we will move on from this." The pair sit idle in their shop, watching social media videos, or reels, on their phones, while the traffic rushes outside. Their unsold kites hang motionless.

Another kite seller in the market, Himanshu Gupta, tells me he is worried about his business's future. His shop was opened by his grandfather 65 years ago, when kites were greatly in demand. While there was a spike in kite-flying during the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic, since then sales have declined again. "People [...] were buying kites to pass the time," says Gupta.



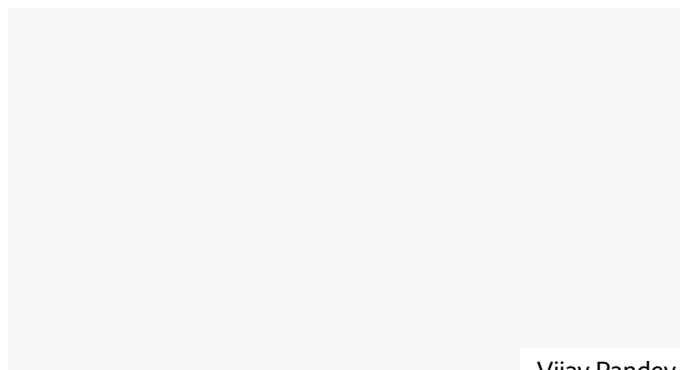


Vijay Pandey

Himanshu Gupta is one of the few kite sellers left in the Lal Kuan market of Old Delhi as kite flying has been replaced with digital distractions (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

Gupta says digital gadgets and increasingly urban lifestyles are drawing people away from the kites. "The world has become pretty fast," he says. Kite flying, the sport of hand-crafted killers, is no longer a thing. One 2025, a 22-year-old man was slashed in the neck by a glass-coated kite string while travelling home from work on his scooter. He was rushed to hospital but declared dead, according to local media. Dozens of other deaths and many gruesome injuries have been reported in recent years, also apparently caused by synthetic or plastic kite strings coated with sharp pieces of metal or glass, called *manjha*. Fliers sometimes use such strings for kite-fighting – the object being to slice your opponent's kite free of its tether. The cords are like thin razors suspended across significant distances.

This year, despite a ban on the sale and use of plastic *manjha*, there have been multiple reported deaths across the Indian states.



Vijay Pandey

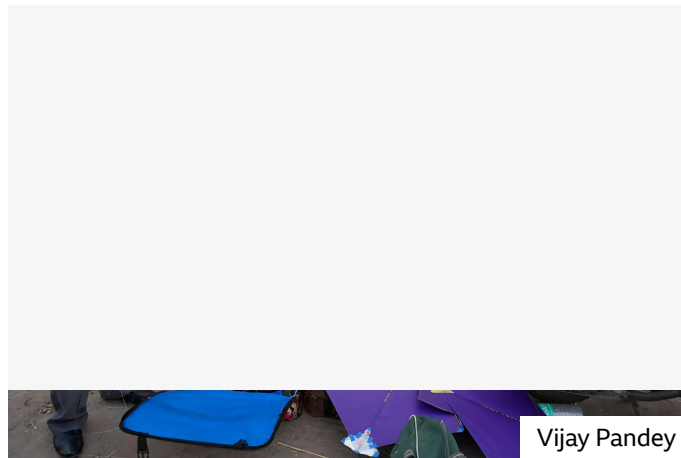
Vijay Pandey

Kite fighting requires both physical and mental agility to out manoeuvre your opponent (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

"If it gets entangled around your neck, it is so sharp that it can cut through it and cause death on the spot," says Devender Singh, an endovascular surgeon in Hyderabad, India, who was the lead author on a 2022 study of kite string injuries. He explains how the strings are strong enough to cut through a person's skin, arteries and veins. Many birds have also been killed by these deadly strands, The people most at risk from wayward kite strings are pedestrians and people travelling on vehicles such as scooters. In 2017, the government in the state of Delhi banned the manufacture, sale, storage, purchase, and use of sharp kite strings. But there could be a simple solution for scooter riders – a metal loop rising from the front of the vehicle, protecting riders from lines that might cut across their path. "When I was in Ahmedabad, I saw people using this aluminium [loop], and I thought this type of mechanism is not used by people in the rest of India," says Snehal Prakash, a scientist at the Indian Council of Medical Research, Pune. He co-authored a 2022 study exploring the efficacy of this approach.

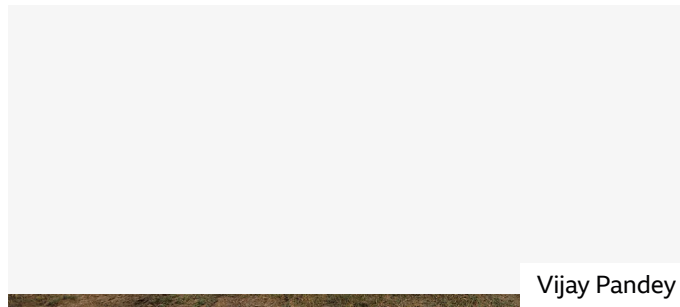
The kite sellers I spoke to say that the fatalities caused by deadly kite strings have, unsurprisingly, affected their business. "It has scared people, and now everyone looks at kites with suspicion," adds Khalid.

With people dying because of kite-flying, the sport might seem best consigned to history. But there are good reasons to keep kite-flying alive, say its proponents.



For many who still fly and fight kites, it is a celebration of their country's history (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

Kite-flying has become an integral part of the country's cultural heritage. It brings together people of all faiths to fly kites and gives them a sense of joy. It involves both physical and mental activity. India's Independence Day, which is particularly symbolic of freedom and kite fighting, has been a key moment. During the Simon Commission's visit to India in 1928, kite-flying was banned. In 1931, kite-flying was used to spread the slogan "Go Back to Britain" and were flown as a message of protest. Kites were used as a silent protest in the sky. Decades later, kite-flyers want to keep that history alive – and also as an expression of joy. Kite-flyers like Jamaluddin and others believe that kite-flying can also be used to keep children and youngsters away from mobile phones and digital gadgets, as India's digital addiction is on the rise in recent years. Collectively, Indians logged more than 1.1 trillion hours of screentime in 2024, according to one report and a recent economic report from the Indian government raised concerns around the mental health effects of digital addiction.



Vijay Pandey

Mohammad Ghayas' lifelong passion for kite flying now provides him with a distraction after being diagnosed with kidney cancer (Credit: Vijay Pandey)

- **Pakistan's famous kite festival**

In Old Delhi, I meet Mohammed Ghayas, **makes a cautious return after 19-year ban**

a man who describes himself as a proud "kite fighter". Kite-flying is a true skill, he

- **The women tackling India's worm poachers**

says. And one that he has spent his life

honing. Nothing has come so close to

- **Did a flatbreak help end British rule in India?**

this passion". His father's attempts to

stop Ghayas flying kites – even, he

claims, "chaining" him up at one point –

Over the years, Ghayas has won dozens

of medals and certificates in kite flying

competitions. Aware of the waning

passion, he laughs. My father couldn't

interest in his sport within India, Ghayas

understand.

says that, today, he feels lost. "It is [...]

More like this:

something that is looked down upon by people and seen as a waste of time and energy."

The use of *manjha* strings have also had an impact, something Ghayas believes should be completely banned. "It has brought a bad name to kite-flying," he says.

This contrasts sharply with what kite-flying means to Ghayas – and how it has shaped his life. I watch as he silently arranges his old medals. He opens a wooden container, which he has kept in the basement of his house, and takes out multiple, dusty old kites, which he has preserved over the years as mementos. Now he is in his sixties, kite-flying has

taken on a new significance for Ghayas, especially after he was diagnosed with kidney cancer nine years ago.

If you liked this story, sign up for The Essential List newsletter – a handpicked selection of features, videos and can't-miss news, delivered to your inbox twice a week. Some things soar even in the face of death. A kite on the wind. A tether held firm. *For more science, technology, environment and health stories from the BBC, follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).*

[Hobbies](#)[Health](#)[Extreme weather](#)[Climate](#)[Technology](#)[Innovation](#)[India](#)[Science](#)[History](#)[Features](#)

WATCH



How the transcontinental railroad changed the US forever

In 1869, two companies connected the east to the west with the United States' first transcontinental railroad.

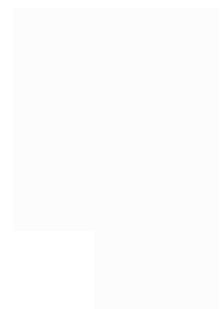
History



The Finnish shipyard making the world's toughest icebreakers

Tech Now heads to Finland to meet the engineers designing icebreaker ships navigating through Arctic sea ice.

Tech Now



Lego's new smart bricks

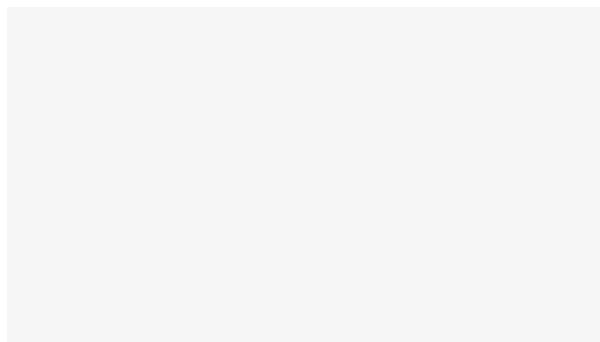
Tech Now explores how Smart Brick, designed for play to next level.

Tech Now

MORE FROM THE BBC

5 hrs ago

'We're having a moment' - fear and denial in Silicon Valley over social media addiction trial

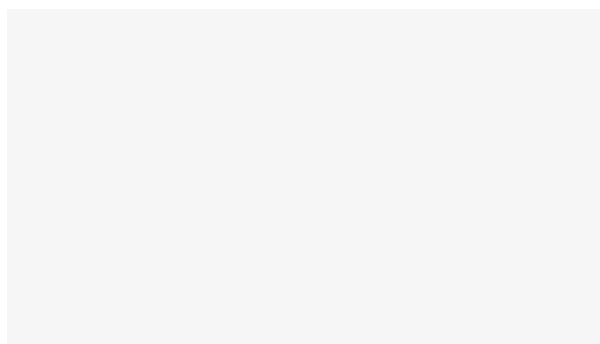


The landmark decision in an LA court may go beyond immediate impacts on defendants Meta and YouTube.

5 hrs ago

5 hrs ago

Are UK students at risk of more deadly meningitis outbreaks?

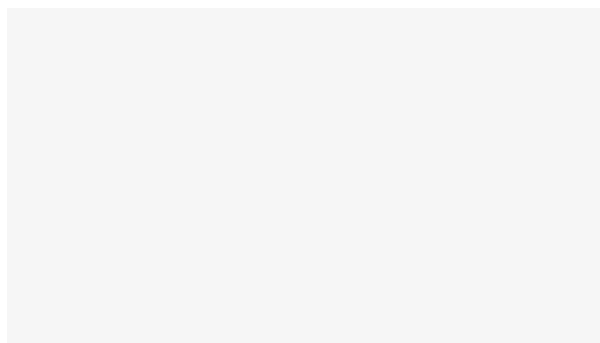


The worst seems to be over, but questions remain about why this happened and whether it could happen again.

5 hrs ago

7 hrs ago

In photos: A pesticide tragedy that haunts an Indian state

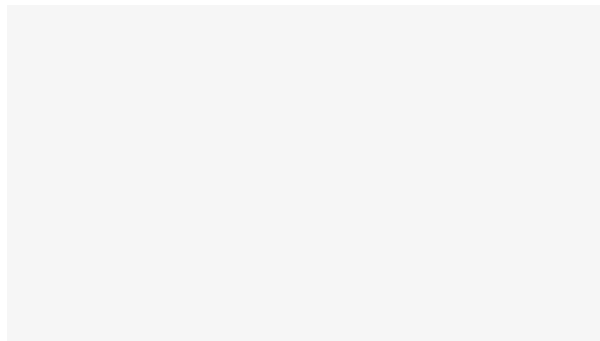


Endosulfan, a toxic pesticide, was used liberally in Kerala's Kasargod district in the 1980s and 1990s.

7 hrs ago

12 hrs ago

Austria becomes latest to propose social media ban for children

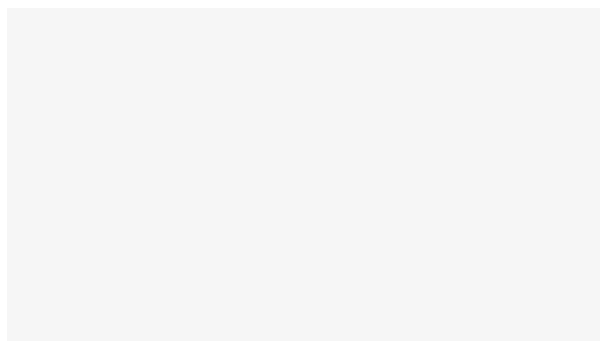


The proposed under-14 ban follows similar steps in other European countries, including France and Spain.

12 hrs ago

17 hrs ago

Bristol Airport submits controversial expansion plan



The airport hopes to add long haul flights and accommodate an extra three million passengers a year.

17 hrs ago



[Home](#) [News](#) [Sport](#) [Business](#) [Technology](#) [Health](#) [Culture](#) [Arts](#) [Travel](#) [Earth](#) [Audio](#)
[Video](#) [Live](#) [Weather](#) [BBC Shop](#) [BritBox](#)

[BBC in other languages](#) ▼

Follow BBC on:      

[Terms of Use](#) [Subscription Terms](#) [About the BBC](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility Help](#)

[Contact the BBC](#) [Advertise with us](#) [Do not share or sell my info](#) [BBC.com Help & FAQs](#) [Content Index](#)

[Set Preferred Source](#)

Copyright 2026 BBC. All rights reserved. The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. **Read about our approach to external linking.**